

**Testimony of Karen Rainville, Executive Director of the
CT Association for the Education of Young Children**

in opposition to HB-6659 AN ACT CONCERNING THE STATE BUDGET FOR THE BIENNIMUM
ENDING JUNE 30, 2025, AND MAKING APPROPRIATIONS THEREFOR.

Senator Osten, Representative Walker, members of the Appropriations Committee, thank you for this opportunity to testify on the Governor's proposed budget for the Office of Early Childhood.

My name is Karen Rainville and I live in Meriden. I am the Executive Director of the CT Association for the Education of Young Children and Co-Chair of the CT Early Childhood Alliance

I have spent my entire career working in the early childhood industry in CT. I began as a Head Start teacher and worked through many roles that led me to where I am today. More than 3 decades working with CT's young children and families. Many things have changed in those 30 plus years. We have learned much about brain science and the critical importance of the first 5 years of a child's life. We have increased educational expectations for teachers to ensure that those working with our youngest children demonstrate the skills and competencies to best support children's development. We have improved our licensing system to ensure basic health and safety in childcare settings across the state. We have engaged parents as advocates and active partners in our work with children. All positive steps forward. And yet I sit before you today talking about the same issue that I spoke about 30 years ago. Compensation in the early childhood industry that is so low, that the educators who show up every day to ensure our youngest citizens have the tools they need for future success, are leaving the field in droves. This industry has reached the breaking point and without immediate long term fiscal change- it will collapse.

The Governor's proposed budget will spend \$50 million dollars less in early childhood from the general fund than was spent last year at a time when we have a 3 ½ billion-dollar surplus and a full rainy-day fund. Turn over in early childhood programs has accelerated, 20% of childcare slots are sitting vacant because programs do not have qualified staff to teach the children. Families are unable to work because they can't find care for their children. Care 4 Kids will close as of March 1st and parents will be put on a lengthy waitlist. All happening as our "rainy day fund" and budget surplus sit idle while we wait for the inevitable collapse of this industry!

If childcare collapses, and make no mistake about it-it will, thousands of adults will be unable to work spiraling CT into a recession. We can see the beginning of that happening all ready. The governor has spoken repeatedly about a need for a federal investment in childcare-and he is right, that would make a huge difference. The sad reality is that we don't have that! Build Back Better did not pass and no large federal investment is on the horizon. We cannot sit back and just wait while children, families and educators in CT suffer. These are Connecticut's children! It falls to CT to step up and prioritize our states future by investing in the early childhood system that supports our children. A lack of federal investment cannot be an excuse to do nothing.

The Governor's proposal to raise the School Readiness rates to \$10,500 in FY25 falls far short of what is needed. The per child rates have been unchanged since 2015 when minimum wage

was \$9.15. By the start of FY24 the minimum wage will have gone up by 64%. To retain teachers and attract additional staff needed to reopen classrooms, funding to programs for wages must go up significantly.

All roads lead back to compensation. Until there is long term transformational change in how we fund the childcare industry so that early childhood educators are compensated comparable to their public-school peers we will not fix this crisis. Educators will continue to leave the field for higher paying jobs in other industries. Early educators are some of the lowest paid workers in the economy. The average wage for a childcare worker is \$14.97, and for a preschool teacher it's \$15.18. Self-employed family childcare providers typically work much longer hours and average less than \$8.50 per hour. Small bonuses and minor increases are simply band aids that may help a program hang on for a few more months but will not prevent their inevitable closure.

Please show that Connecticut's young children are your priority by passing a budget that will allow for transformational change in early childhood funding. Don't let this industry collapse on your watch.

Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to testify on behalf of early educators in CT. My agency stands ready to support your work.